

# The last word Censorship on public television

by the Editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 27, July 1982, p. 72

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The National Endowment for the Humanities (N.E.H.) and the one for the Arts (N.E.A.), as well as the various state humanities and arts councils which disperse much of the money, are a major source of funding for independent film and video productions. At the same time, these sources, and the major outlet for film and video, public television, directly and indirectly censor work they disagree with politically.

FROM THE ASHES: NICARAGUA TODAY received \$45,600 from the Wisconsin Humanities Committee as part of a grant to the films co-sponsor, the Campus Ministry Group at the University of Wisconsin. After seeing the film on New York's public television station, WNET, the Reagan administration's head of N.E.H., William J. Bennett, denounced it as "unabashed socialist realist propaganda" and declared it should never have received federal funds, because its content and method did not fall within the humanities. We can easily understand this as political censorship. Since the N.E.H. Chairperson does not choose the projects that will be funded, he is clearly trying to intimidate the people who do. He is clearly saying that if local humanities councils fund programs he disagrees with politically, he will withdraw funds from them. When giving statements to the press, Bennett disdained to even define the humanities nor even what specific criteria a project would have to meet in order to qualify for N. E.H. money. His vagueness is part of the intimidation which has had a wide-ranging effect on the timid bureaucracy he heads.

When the leaders of the state humanities councils gathered for a national meeting recently, some criticized Bennett for his pronouncements about FROM THE ASHES, but only on procedural grounds — i.e., how to fund projects and choose them. No one would defend the film (New York Times, May 7, 1982). Furthermore, when Public Television stations presented the film after Bennett's statements

to the press, they surrounded it with panels and commentators that were to explain its errors. In the Midwest, the film was followed by a lengthy denunciation from conservative journalist Georgie Anne Geyer, whose newspaper columns always take the State Department line. Like Alexander Haig, she asserted that there are human rights violations in Nicaragua which the film did not deal with, but she did not offer any proof. Nor did she discuss worse violations inflicted by the numerous third world dictatorships our government supports, nor the consistent human rights violations stemming from institutionalized racism in the United States. If a film merely wishes to delineate some of the gains achieved under a socialist regime, that makes it biased in a way that Public Television feels needs a counterbalance — a kind of counterbalance provided for none of its other documentary programs.

In New York, WNET circumscribed in an even worse way its presentation of Obie Benz's *AMERICAS IN TRANSITION*, a film which depicts the historical pattern of U.S. military intervention in Latin America. Before the film was shown, the moderator, Robert Kaiser of the *Washington Post*, warned viewers that the film was one-sided and factually flawed, and that the panel afterward would provide a necessary corrective. Speaking afterward were two people from foreign policy think tanks allied with the federal government: Robert Leiken, a staff associate with Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Susan Purcell, of the Council on Foreign Relations. Also speaking was Karl Meyer, an editorial writer for the *New York Times*. Meyer said that Benz was well-intentioned but naive to think that his film presented the truth. Purcell said the film should have focused on U.S.-Latin American foreign policy successes in Argentina, Panama, Brazil, and Chile! People talked on the panel about Nicaragua as a totalitarian state, again without proof, and cited as a factual error the film's statement that U.S. military aid goes to Guatemala. The panelists pointed out that since Congress has never authorized military aid to Guatemala, only "humanitarian" aid can officially go there.

Public Television, which uses many N.E.H. funded documentaries and is itself funded by the U.S. government (see JUMP CUT, No. 22), has held up showing many public issue documentaries made during the Carter administration. According to *Mother Jones* (July 1, 1982), Public Television refused to show Howard Petrick's *THE CASE OF THE LEGLESS VETERAN*, JAMES KUTCHER because it had too much in it about the socialist political history of a veteran who was fired for political reasons, and Susanna Styron's *IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS*, a film about uranium mining. Public Television similarly moved away from prime time a film about U.S. foreign policy in the Western Sahara, *BLOOD AND SAND*, produced by Sharon Sopher.

Although independent filmmakers legitimately hope Public Television will provide a way for their work to be seen by a larger public, they must

understand the interconnections of federal funding between N.E.H., N.E.A., the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (C.P.B.), the Public Broadcasting System (P.B.S. — which actually buys and markets programs to the various stations), and the many individual public television stations. Such an interrelation means that the general timidity and fear felt by these agencies during the Reagan administration is affecting the television distribution of films and videotapes on radical topics.

For this reason, it is vital that we support the distribution of such works through alternative media networks, and, in the case of films on Central America, through local solidarity groups working in support of Nicaragua and El Salvador. Many of these groups buy a print of a film, slide show, or tape. The discussion after these presentations provides a whole different experience than seeing the same film on television.

JUMP CUT is committed to building an alternative media culture in the United States. In the meantime, however, we must assert the rights of freedom of expression for radical filmmakers, and protest the overt censorship of their work. Letters should be sent to William J. Bennett, Chairperson, N.E.H., 806 15th Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20506 and to your Congress persons about FROM THE ASHES and Bennett's overt efforts to censor the arts.

Letters should also be sent to Robben W. Fleming, President, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1111 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20036; and to Lawrence K. Grossman, President, Public Broadcasting System, 475 L'Enfant Plaza W., Southwest Washington, D.C., 20024; and to your local Public Television station. Tell them what you want to see and that you don't want them to censor it. All the documentaries listed in this issue can and should be a part of Public Television's regular fare.

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